

ter known? Taine himself (preface to the *Lettres a une inconnue*⁵) does not seem to have properly understood or appreciated it, not by a long shot. Yes, it is better than anything that I supposed Merimee could write. Really first-rate.

3 December

Read this evening *La Partie de tric-trac**—*irL* which I recognize once more that unbearable impression of a successful student theme and of useless perfection which ordinarily irritates me every time I open Merimee again.

The *subject* is not propounded: A man of honor cheats. That was enough. —But he wins. He wins forty thousand francs. And the man against whom he was playing commits suicide. *There* is something to increase his remorse. But what would he have done if the Dutchman hadn't killed himself? What would he have done if he had won only a little? — *That is what interests me.* And the rest is a mere news item.

What he would have done? ... He would have cheated again. And that would have been very pathetic. For there is no *essential* difference between the honest man and the knave. And the fact that the honest man can become a knave is both terrible and true. In the path of "sin" only the first step is difficult. And it has already been said that it was easier for a woman not to have a lover than to have but one.

This is the story of Laf cadio.

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Dialogue des Amateurs in the *Mercure* of 15 November— in which M. de Gourmont returns to one of his three favorite themes: alcoholism, demoralization, depopulation. He proves (or tries at least to prove) anyone guilty of stupidity who is cautious and frightened, who does not reason as follows: The proof that France is still overpopulated is that one still meets workmen without work. Moreover:

'Invasion would
probably not do France so much harm as all that It's
only an unpleas-
ant moment to go through/' he says farther on.

'The big words must all be soiled,** he says in the
following number.

If that were all he soiled! . . .

Oh, of course, I understand what M. de Gourmont
means and agree
that it is good to demolish, certain idols. But those big
words today often
seem to me already covered with filth; and often when I
seek the **big
word," I see only a M. de Gourmont soiling it.

When I cease getting angry, I shall have already
begun my old age.

⁵ *Letters to an Unknown Woman*. "Arsene Guillot" is a
story by M&imee.

⁶ Another M6rim6e story, "A Game of Backgainmon/*